

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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1977--A WHOOPING CRANE BONANZA

Whooping crane production in 1977 has exceeded all expectations, and the outlook for this endangered bird, symbol of America's wildlife conservation effort, has never been brighter, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

This year's breeding season has ended, and a survey taken by Fish and Wildlife Service officials reveals not only a record number of whoopers, but possibilities of even greater success next year.

In all there may be 126 whooping cranes in existence in the wild and in captivity. Twenty-nine of these were hatched this spring, and biologists believe that even if half die from weather, predators, accidents, and other causes, as is often the case, 1977 will still be a spectacular year for the species.

The figures shape up like this: The major 69-bird wild flock that summers and breeds in Canada produced 34 eggs, two of which were almost immediately eaten by unknown predators. Sixteen of the remaining eggs were flown to Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho and placed in nests under greater sandhill cranes, cousins of the whoopers. The effort is part of a joint Canadian Wildlife Service-U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service project to establish a second population of the endangered birds in the

(more)

wild. So far 12 chicks are known to have survived from the 16 eggs. Of the other whoopers reared by sandhills in this way over the last 2 years, five are still living.

Meanwhile, back at the whooping crane traditional nesting grounds in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park, 15 of the 16 eggs left hatched, and 11 chicks have survived.

But the really incredible news for the whooping crane has come from the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center at Laurel, Maryland, where four pairs of whoopers from the 19-bird international captive flock produced a total of 22 eggs. (in 1976, the flock produced only five.) Eight of these eggs were flown out to Grays Lake on May 7, but all were wiped out by a 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch snowstorm that killed two hatched chicks and caused sandhills to abandon the remaining nests. A second batch of six eggs flown out on May 22 fared much better; three hatched, one egg was eaten by a coyote, and two didn't hatch. Two other chicks remain at Patuxent, a third died, and another egg is being incubated there by a pair of sandhills. Two eggs were infertile and one had an early embryo death. The 22nd egg disappeared from a sandhill crane nest at Patuxent, probably either destroyed by an adult or removed by a predator.

Service biologists expect as many as three other pairs of whoopers at the Center will begin to produce eggs in the near future since they are presumed to be approaching sexual maturity.

Four other whoopers, including two from Patuxent, are being held for breeding purposes at the San Antonio Zoo and at the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin. A fifth is at the Audubon Park Zoo in New Orleans.

The final '77 tally of whooping cranes won't be in until the late fall when the Grays Lake flock migrates 800 miles to New Mexico near the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and the Canadian flock makes its way south to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, a distance of 2,450 miles.

It's a vulnerable time now for the whooping crane chicks, and not all are expected to make it. After surviving a brutal winter, they currently face a drought that has lowered marsh water levels at Grays Lake. This has reduced the amount of vegetation and saturated soil where the chicks can forage for insects and other invertebrates and has left them with fewer areas in which to hide from coyotes. Because of this, the Service has stepped up its control efforts at the refuge and 12 coyotes have been killed so far this year.

"Normally a whooper in the wild will lay two eggs, but rarely does more than one chick survive," Schreiner said. "At Patuxent we've taken the eggs away from the whoopers, not only saving the eggs but also causing the birds to recycle. One pair laid nine eggs this year. So we'll concentrate on producing eggs for the smaller Grays Lake flock in Idaho."

Another plan under consideration is to have whooper eggs hatched by sandhills at Patuxent, raised there for a year, and then released at Grays Lake when they are stronger and better able to fend for themselves. This would cut down considerably on the tremendous mortality whoopers experience during the first year. Experiments with sandhills raised this way already are having encouraging results.

After several years of studying and raising the birds, observations from biologists have enabled them to overcome a number of obstacles which had blocked the recovery of the whooping crane. Probably the biggest breakthrough has been the simulation in Laurel, Maryland, of conditions in Canada's Northwest Territories where the whoopers naturally breed.

"By extending daylight hours through artificial means, we've managed to simulate the photoperiod of the whoopers' nesting grounds in Canada," Schreiner said. "Starting about Valentine's Day, we extend the daylight to 14 hours and then increase it by 3 percent weekly until June when daylight is almost 24 hours. This helps them get into breeding condition. Since the birds haven't mated naturally in captivity, an animal physiologist perfected a technique for artificially inseminating the whooping cranes."

A serious leg problem that afflicts captive whooping cranes causes deformity that often results in death. Researchers now think that long-legged birds in captivity, such as whooping cranes which are usually hatched in incubators and raised with turkey chicks, may grow faster and get less exercise than those raised by parents in the wild. So, in addition to feeding them a specially formulated low calorie food which will slow down their growth, the eggs laid at Patuxent too early to be placed in nests in Idaho will be hatched and reared by sandhill cranes. Apparently, chicks reared by parents in the large grassy enclosures get much more exercise than those raised in incubators. This will also eliminate sending out eggs too early in the spring and risking more late snowstorms or other adversities.

"We don't think we've overcome all the obstacles yet," said Schreiner, "but the Patuxent program has now progressed from an experimental program to an operational one. The encouraging results with this symbolic species are a tribute to those who over a decade ago advocated what was then a bold venture in wildlife conservation.

"The whooper is still endangered, but it's made one more step toward recovery."

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